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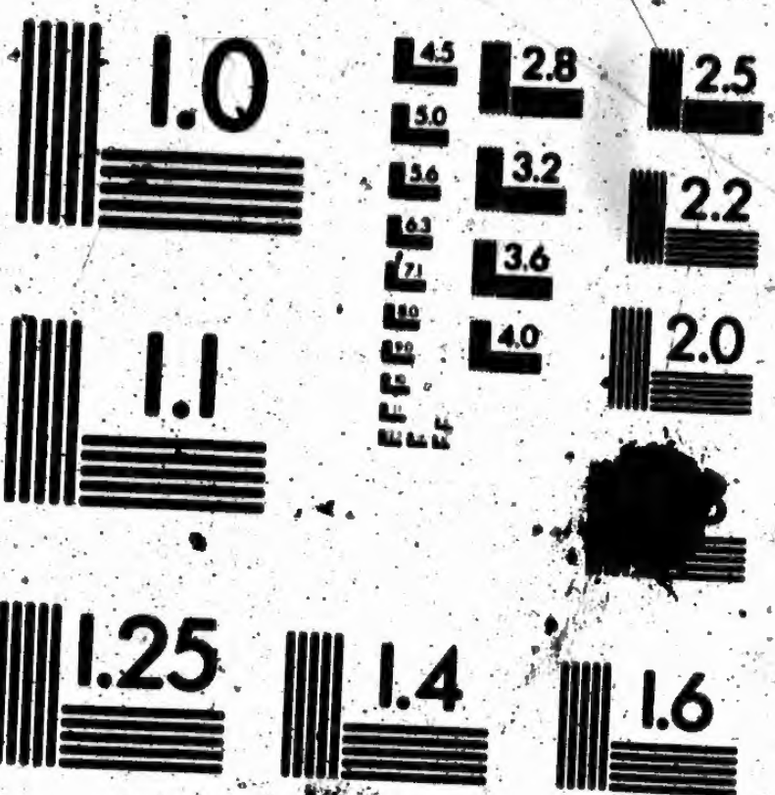

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THE BASIS OF METHODIST UNION:

What it Is, and What it Involves.

BY THE REV. A. SUTHERLAND, D.D.,

Secretary of the Union Committee.

"The Bugles Sang Truce."

THE bugles of the Methodist hosts have sounded a parley. The thunder of the cannonade and the rattle of small arms is hushed for a time. A conviction has been gaining ground that "some one has blundered," and that there has been a mistake in the plan of the campaign. Some of the regiments, it would seem, have occasionally mistaken friends for foes, and instead of keeping up a steady fire against the common enemy, have poured volleys into each other's ranks. Even when the mistake has been pointed out, the captains have been slow to acknowledge that any wrong has been done; and some have gone so far as to declare that this style of warfare is part of the general plan, and that the glory of the great Commander will be more effectually promoted thereby, than if each were employed exclusively in fighting the "world, the flesh, and the devil."

Shall the Blunder be Repeated?

But others (a large majority, I venture to think,) are of a different opinion. To them it seems clear that a great mistake has been made. They have been asking (and at last the question is heard above the din of battle), "*What have we been fighting about?*" We listen for an answer, but there is none. What we have been fighting about, no one can tell. Now that

a truce is proclaimed, another question is heard: "Shall we perpetuate the old mistake?" and in many hearts the answer is becoming a fixed purpose, "It must not be perpetuated!". Of all kinds of war, civil war is the worst, and of civil wars none are so bad as when regiments of the same grand army turn their weapons against each other. As in the case of the Midianitish host, the result must be disaster and defeat.

What are the Facts?

Dropping figure, let us turn to fact. For fifty years, in the Western part of the Dominion, two Methodist Churches have confronted each other. For a considerable part of that time, five such Churches have been in the field, not always fighting against a common foe, but sometimes quarreling about the spoil. Eight years ago two of these Churches united their forces, and although some prophesied disaster, the results of that Union have been most blessed. To-day this united Church and three others are consulting as to the possibility of a wider Union that shall embrace all the parts, and combine the divided Methodisms of the Dominion into one solid, compact body, mighty for good through the power of the Holy Ghost. Some eighty ministers and laymen from the several bodies have met in Council, and after much thought and earnest prayer have reached common ground. A Basis of Union—each part of which was adopted by an almost unanimous vote—has been prepared, and will shortly be laid before the various Quarterly Meetings and Conferences. That Basis presents the only ground on which it seems possible for the various bodies to meet; and if it be rejected as a whole, all thought of Union must be abandoned for at least a generation to come. In fact the conviction was almost unanimous in the Joint Committee, that Union must be now or never.

Gravity of the Question.

This question of the hour is grave; the issues are momentous; the responsibilities of Quarterly Meetings and Conferences are of the weightiest kind. That the question is one of absorbing interest in the circles of Canadian Methodism, we all know; but it has passed far beyond that limit. The Methodist press

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of two hemispheres is watching the movement; the daily press of Toronto—second to none on this Continent—devoted large space to a report of the Committee's proceedings; and even such a paper as the New York *Herald* wrote to a Toronto correspondent, asking to be put in possession of "full particulars of the movement." All this shows that the progress of Methodist Unification in the Dominion has an interest for multitudes outside of Methodist circles. The eyes of the Christian world are upon us; and this of itself should be sufficient to lead those who have to decide the question, to approach it in the Spirit of the awakened Saul of Tarsus—"Lord, what would'st THOU have me to do?"

The Work and Spirit of the Committee.

It should be borne in mind that the Joint Committee was appointed *to prepare a Basis of Union*, and not to propose a method by which one Church might absorb all the rest. To make Union possible, there had to be mutual concessions, and an important part of the Committee's business was to ascertain how far, in the matter of concessions, the various bodies were ready to approach one another. They wisely decided to ascertain, first of all, the points of agreement, that they might the more readily determine whether the remaining points presented insuperable barriers to Union. The work, it must be confessed, was begun with some misgivings. The estrangements of the past seemed very wide; and to some it was doubtful if the separating gulfs could be bridged over. But these very misgivings and doubts led to increased prayerfulness; and this resulted in a firm purpose to prosecute the work in such a spirit that whether a Basis were found or not, the members of the Committee would part as brethren. This spirit, with scarce an exception, was maintained to the close; and to this, more than anything else, may be attributed the harmony of the Committee's proceedings, and the success of its work.

The Doctrinal Basis.

As had been anticipated, no difficulty was experienced in regard to matters of doctrine and usage. On these points it

was found that absolute unity already existed; and so after brief conversation, and without discussion, the first thirty-three pages of the Discipline of the Methodist Church of Canada, covering Standards of Doctrine, Articles of Religion, General Rules, Ordinances, Reception of Members, and Means of Grace, were adopted *en bloc*, no change being necessary to harmonize them with the utterances of the other uniting Churches on the same points. This fact is, of itself, most significant, and furnishes one of the strongest possible arguments in favour of Union. In fact it changes the aspect of the whole question. Hitherto some have been asking "Is there any good reason why the Methodist Churches of this Country should unite?" But in view of the fact above stated, they are now asking, "Is there any longer a good reason why they should not unite?" That Churches which are absolutely one in doctrine, general rules, and usages, should remain apart, is an anomoly which I, for one cannot even attempt to justify.

Two Test Points.

The question of a Doctrinal Basis being settled, the Committee prepared to grapple with what some considered the real difficulties, namely,—General Superintendency, and Lay Representation in the Annual Conferences. There seemed to be a conviction, general though unexpressed, that if common ground could be reached on these two points, all the rest would be comparatively easy. Now came the time for concession, and the time, moreover, to test the sincerity of professed Unionists. In the discussions in our own General Conference only one man, so far as I remember, openly declared himself opposed to Union; but not a few who felt it necessary to declare that they were Union men, argued strongly against it; while others, declaring themselves in favour of Union, indicated plainly enough that they were prepared to be dissatisfied with any basis that might be proposed. They were in favour of Union in the abstract, but they would concede nothing. The same thing, substantially, held true in regard to the other bodies. Like ourselves, they had Unionists and—Unionists. But when the Committees met face to face these Union-in-the-abstract brethren found

themselves in a dilemma. If they declared themselves opposed to Union, they would not only have to face a very strong counter-current of opinion, but would put themselves in antagonism to the plainly-expressed sentiments of their respective Conferences. If they declared in favour of Union, they were at once met with the query,—"Well, what are you willing to concede in order to promote it?"

The Situation.

General Superintendency was the only question on which *all* the uniting bodies had something to concede. This will be better understood if we briefly review the attitude of each body in regard to this question. On the right of the line stood the Methodist Episcopal Church, with her system of Episcopacy both in name and in fact. On the left were the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, the former, at least, so far removed from Episcopacy that a layman might preside, and sometimes has presided, in their Annual Conferences. In the centre was the Methodist Church of Canada, with a well-defined Superintendency running through her Circuit, District, and Conference organizations, but with a constitutional timidity that prevented her from calling a spade a spade, and with an unaccountable dread lest a system that had worked so admirably in the several parts, might become an element of danger when extended over the whole Connexion.

Solution of the Problem.

How were these seemingly diverse systems to be harmonized? Only by *mutual* concessions; there was no other way. The General Conference of the Methodist Church of Canada had expressed its willingness, in order to promote Union, to accept an Itinerant General Superintendency, provided it did not interfere with the duties of Annual Conference Officers. Some regarded this as a limit put upon the action of the representatives of that Conference in the Committee; others regarded it simply as an expression of the judgment and preference of the Conference at the time, and not as a finality; still, if the representatives of the Methodist Episcopal Church would accept is as satisfactory, so much the better. The reply of the Metho-

dist Episcopal Deputies was in effect as follows: "Brethren, we are quite willing to meet you half-way, but we cannot abandon our cherished system for a Superintendency so limited as the one you propose, because by the very constitution of our Church, we are prohibited from doing anything to destroy the plan of our Itinerant General Superintendency. We are willing, for the sake of Union, to *modify* our system, but we cannot consent to *destroy* it; and we ask no more of you."

What will you Concede?

"Well, what will you concede; and what do you ask?" "We would much prefer," the Methodist Episcopal Delegates said, "to keep our system just as it is; but knowing that, if Union is to take place, this cannot be, we will concede two things,—the life appointment and the separate consecration. But we ask that the Itinerant General Superintendent, whom it is proposed to appoint, shall be a reality, and not a mere figure-head; and that he shall have such a recognized place in the Annual Conferences as will constitute a real connection between these bodies and the General Conference."

What did the Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian brethren think of this? Well, they had been accustomed only to such Superintendency as is exercised by the Chairmen of Districts and the Presidents of Annual Conferences; but in such a Superintendency as was now proposed they could see no harm, and, indeed, they thought a little more Superintendency than they had been accustomed to might be a good thing for the Church. At all events, that no bar to Union might arise from their side, they were willing to accept the proposal of the Methodist Episcopal brethren.

The Vote.

Long and patiently the proposition was discussed, and opportunity was given to every man to say all that was in his heart. The more fully the question was considered the clearer it became that the Methodist Episcopal delegation was meeting the other Churches fully half way. At length a vote was taken, and out of a committee of some seventy members there were but eight or nine dissentients, at least three of whom were

Methodist Episcopal delegates. When the conclusion was reached, a profound sense of relief was experienced. No one regarded the vote as, in any sense, a personal or party triumph, but each seemed to regard it as a decision to which they had been led in the fear of God. There was no noisy applause; but pent-up emotions found vent in the strains of the grand old Doxology, and then the Committee adjourned for the night.

Lay Representation.

On the question of Lay Representation in the Annual Conferences, it seemed necessary that three out of the four uniting Churches should change front a little. The Methodist Church of Canada and the Methodist Episcopal Church have each lay representation in the General Conference, but none in the Annual; the Bible Christians have ministers and laymen in equal numbers in the Annual Conference; while the Primitive Methodists have two laymen for each minister in that assembly. Where a General Conference exists, the functions of an Annual Conference are necessarily very limited. It has no authority to legislate, and a large part of its business is of a routine sort, dealing with matters of ministerial character, qualification, and work. In view of these facts, there was a somewhat general opinion in the Committee that lay representation in the Annual Conferences would be a doubtful good, and would be lightly esteemed by the laymen themselves. But the laymen in two of the Churches had been accustomed to sit in the Annual Conferences, and there was reason to fear that in these two Churches Union could not be carried unless lay representation, in some form, was conceded. At first it was proposed that the representation should be very limited—two or three from a District, but it was felt that this was merely playing with the question, and if there was to be lay representation at all it must be in equal numbers with ministers. In this form the recommendation eventually carried.

Church Funds.

The only other question of serious moment was that relating to Church funds. Some of these were quickly settled. The

Children's Fund, having no invested capital in any of the Churches, was relegated to the first General Conference, to make such arrangements as might be deemed expedient. In regard to the Contingent Fund, the Methodist Church of Canada alone has invested capital, and as this belongs to the three Western Conferences of that Church, it was left to these Conferences to decide what should be done with it; and any other action was referred to the first General Conference. The Missionary Fund was not so easily adjusted, as in one case there was a defict of $10,000, and in another of over $18,000 It was agreed, however, that in both cases the debt should be paid before the Union was consummated, and thus the obstacle was removed.

As might have been expected, the Superannuation Fund presented the most serious difficulties. That men should be very sensitive in regard to a fund that made provision—scant, it is true, but real—for their old age, was but natural; and the most exhaustive discussions took place before a basis was reached. Sub-Committees met, and pondered, and reported, but their reports did not seem to meet the case; proposition after proposition was made, discussed, and laid on the table; but at length the Committee saw, with tolerable clearness, all that the discussion involved, and embodied its judgment in a series of resolutions that for comprehensiveness and fairness must commend themselves to every unbiased mind. These resolutions require that the other uniting Churches shall provide an amount of invested capital equal, in proportion, to that now held by the Methodist Church of Canada; that income arising from collections and subscriptions in the congregations, and the annual subscriptions of ministers, shall be used in meeting payments to all claimants; that income arising from the invested capital now held by the Methodist Church of Canada for this fund, and from the Toronto Book Room, shall be used exclusively for the benefit of superannuates of that Church, until such time as the other uniting Churches equalize their Book Room assets and Superannuation Fund securities with those of the said Methodist Church of Canada; that no change shall be made in regard to the claims of any minister now holding a permanent superannuated relation; and that if in any

year the income shall not be sufficient to meet the claims in full, then all claimants shall share in the deficiency in proportion to the amount of their respective claims.

Changes neither Numerous nor Radical.

Let us now enquire just what changes and concessions are involved in the Basis of Union as finally adopted, so that we may be in a position to determine whether they are of such a character as to call for an adverse vote from any Quarterly Meeting or Conference. I am persuaded that most people will be surprised that the concessions, as a rule, are so small, and the changes so few. During the sessions of the Union Committee, a great many proposals were made and published that were not finally adopted, while some things carried at an early stage were afterwards rescinded. From this circumstance, many have received an erroneous impression of what was really done, and it is the more desirable, therefore, that a distinct summary should be presented. It should be understood, moreover, that part of what is contained in the Basis is little more than a statement of what has been the practice in all the uniting Churches in the past, and which they agree shall continue in the future, the changes being so slight as to call for no comment; while another part, referring to Church Funds, and Educational, Publishing, and Church Property Institutions, contains simply proposals for adjusting certain financial interests, and involves no particular "concessions" on either side. Divested of all extraneous matter, we get the following points:—

1. *Doctrine, etc.*—In Standards of Doctrine, Articles of Religion, General Rules, Ordinances, Reception of Members, and Means of Grace, no changes or concessions are necessary.

2. *The General Conference.*—No change is proposed in the composition or functions of this body as it has existed in the Methodist Church of Canada, and in the Methodist Episcopal Church. But the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, in coming into the Union, concede the transfer of legislative authority from the Annual to the General Conference.

3. *General Superintendency.*—On this point, if the Basis is confirmed, all the uniting Churches will make concessions. The

Methodist Episcopal Church surrenders the life appointment and the separate ordination, or, as they prefer to call it, consecration. The Methodist Church of Canada concedes an eight years' term of office and an extension of authority, whereby such Superintendent may preside, in turn, with the President elected by an Annual Conference, and conduct an ordination service. The Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian Churches accept this arrangement as a necessary part of a general Union scheme.

4. *Annual Conferences.*—The Methodist Church of Canada and the Methodist Episcopal Church concede the introduction of lay representatives in equal numbers with ministers. The Primitive Methodist Church consents to one lay representative for each minister, instead of two. Equal lay representation being already the practice in the Bible Christian Church, no concession was necessary on their part. The two latter Churches also concede that certain questions shall be dealt with by ministers only, and that the Stationing Committee shall be composed entirely of ministers. The above change in the composition of Annual Conferences involves a change in the election of laymen to the General Conference. If the Basis is confirmed, they will henceforth be elected by the laymen in the Annual Conferences, instead of in the District Meetings.

5. *Ordination of Preachers.*— The Methodist Episcopal Church relinquishes the ordination of deacons as a distinct office, and the ordination of local preachers; but Annual Conferences are to have authority to ordain probationers of less than four years' standing, when the necessities of the work require it; no change worth mentioning takes place in either the District or Quarterly Meetings; and all preachers who have been ordained in any of the uniting bodies, and are in good standing at the time of the Union, are to retain all rights and privileges conferred by such ordination.

6. *District Meetings.*—No change worth mention is made in the composition or functions of District Meetings, and no concessions were necessary.

7. *District Chairman.*—It is proposed that this officer shall be in name what he is in fact,—District Superintendent. The Methodist Episcopal Church relinquishes her plan of travelling Chairmen.

8. *Quarterly Meetings.*—No changes are proposed in the composition or functions of Quarterly Meetings, but the Primitive Methodist Church agrees that the Circuit Superintendent shall be *ex-officio* Chairman of the Quarterly Meeting, as is now the practice in the other Churches.

9. *Church Property.*—No concessions are necessary; but a plan is proposed of dealing with property that may not be required after the Union.

10. *Church Funds.*—In regard to these, the work of the Committee was simply to protect vested interests, and to prepare an equitable basis on which to adjust the various claims. Whether they have succeeded in this, the Church at large must judge.

11. *Book and Publishing Interests.*—The Halifax and Toronto Publishing Interests of the Methodist Church of Canada are to be maintained, and no difficulty is apprehended in the way of consolidating the other publishing interests at an early date after Union.

12. *Educational Interests.*—The Educational Institutions in the Maritime Provinces are to remain unchanged. Those in the west having University powers, will be consolidated.

Points that will be Opposed.

Such, in brief, is the Basis of Union agreed upon by the Joint Committee. Much of it will be accepted without controversy; but there are three points that may elicit opposition. These are, 1. General Superintendency; 2. Lay Representation in the Annual Conferences; 3. The Superannuation Fund. On the first point some opposition may arise from two of the uniting bodies, namely, the Methodist Church of Canada, and the Methodist Episcopal Church; but in neither case is it likely to come from the laity. Ministers in the former body may possibly oppose it because of their dislike of Superintendency in any form, especially in a form that will in any way interfere with the absolute independence of Annual Conferences. Ministers in the latter body may possibly oppose it from a conviction that, in giving up the life appointment and the separate consecration, they are yielding the essentials of Superintendency. But both should remember that without mutual

compromise there could be no Union at all; and, therefore, if each tenaciously maintains the ground indicated above, they must be content to be understood as saying—"We want no Union with the other party on any terms whatever."

In the matter of Lay Representation in the Annual Conferences, the opposition, if any, will probably come from Ministers of the Methodist Church of Canada. The Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian Churches have always had it, and will not object to it now. The Methodist Episcopal Church has not had it, but, so far as I can learn, they do not object to its introduction. The laity of the Methodist Church of Canada have shown no special desire for it; but as it will increase rather than restrict their privileges, it is not likely they will oppose it. Ministers of the latter body may object, not because they are averse to laymen taking an equal share with themselves in the business of the Church, but because they see no good likely to accrue from the measure, while on the other hand it will necessitate further divisions of Annual Conferences, or greatly increase the difficulties of billeting.

In regard to the Superannuation Fund, it is not easy to tell from what source opposition may arise. Some may regard the proposed basis as unsatisfactory; but let them sit down and endeavour to draft something better, and they will probably find that the plan submitted by the Committee is as fair and equitable as any that can be devised.

Surplus Men.

One very common objection urged against Union is, that in the unavoidable readjustment of the work a large number of ministers will be on the hands of the various Stationing Committees for whom there will be no circuits. But I am persuaded this difficulty is greatly over-stated. The number of "surplus men" will be found to be much smaller than many suppose. A short time ago a minister of the London Conference (who, by the way, is anything but favourable to Union), referred to this point. He said some argued for Union on the ground that it would effect a great saving in men and money, "but," he continued, "I have been looking over the London Conference, and I can call up but two or three places where, if Union were con-

summated, it would be necessary to close a church or remove a minister." In like manner, a sub-Committee of the Union Committee, appointed to consider this very subject, reported that, in their judgment, not only would all the men now in the work be required, but more. I do not know on what data their conclusion was based, and am inclined to think that, like the minister above referred to, they took a too favourable view; but yet if the work of readjustment is carefully and conscientiously performed, and the rapidly-growing needs of the North-West are fairly met, the entire force now in the active work of the Uniting Churches will be quickly absorbed. At the time of the former Union there was the same outcry about "surplus men," and yet, after the Union, not one of the Conferences paused, even for a single year, in taking out new men; and even then the entries in the lists of stations of "one wanted," were neither few nor far between.

Economy in Working.

Suppose it to be true that, after Union, a certain number of men will not be needed on fields where they are now labouring, this difficulty will be met by a corresponding advantage in another direction. Let us suppose a case—a real one—where ministers of three Methodist Churches occupy nearly the same ground, each receiving aid from the Missionary Fund of his Church. In the re-arrangement of the work two men are found to be sufficient. But two men can be supported on the ground, and the whole missionary grant thus saved will be sufficient to support the third man on a new field. This may be called an extreme case, or an extreme way of putting it, but it illustrates a state of things that will be found in varying degrees on not a few circuits. That the rivalries of the past have caused an unnecessary multiplication of men in the same fields, no one conversant with the facts will attempt to deny. How often in Stationing Committees have we heard the appointment of additional men urged solely on the ground that "we *must* give the people a preaching service every Sunday;" and when the question was asked, "Why must we do this?" the answer was sure to be, "If we don't, the ———s will come in and take

the ground." And so, for a reason that we should have been ashamed to confess, men were multiplied, and missionary money that had been given to send the Gospel to the destitute was spent in increasing the privileges of those who were quite able to support their own ministers, and who would have supported them but for those wretched divisions that set altar against altar, and sometimes separated chief friends. As the Methodist Churches by their unwise, not to say unchristian, policy, have brought these evils upon themselves, they should not complain if some temporary inconvenience is experienced in getting rid of them.

Some Real Difficulties.

While in some quarters there may be a disposition to magnify difficulties, and even to conjure up ghosts wherewith to frighten the people, I am not ignorant of the fact that there are real difficulties to be encountered—difficulties that will require time and patience to overcome. The amalgamation of congregations, the division of circuits, the employment of all the men, the sale of surplus property, the finances necessary to carry on the missionary work of the Church, and meet the claims of her superannuated ministers—these are all questions affected by Union, and they must be grasped with a vigorous and steady hand. But our worst difficulties will be of another kind, growing out of the passions and prejudices of men. Old wounds may break out afresh, local jealousies may hamper the work of re-adjustment, covetousness may make the difficulties of the position an excuse for witholding the necessary supplies, personal rights—real or supposed—may clamour for recognition; and all this will tend to embarrass the work of unification. If, therefore, the work is to be brought to a successful issue, it must be carried on with a calmness that no irritating word can ruffle, a patience that no delay can tire, a courage that no opposition can affright; above all, with a sublime faith that sees God's hand in the darkness, and a singleness of purpose in which self shall have no place.

Let Officials Inform Themselves.

As the Quarterly Meetings are to pronounce upon the Basis in February, 1883, it is of the utmost importance that every

official member should inform himself of the real merits of the case without delay, so that he may be in a position to give an independent and intelligent vote. Let every such member carefully read the basis as finally adopted and published, until he thoroughly understands just what changes are proposed, and what the effect of those changes is likely to be. The final effect of the vote to be given no man can fully foresee. But this much we know, that he who votes for Union, does what in him lies to remove a standing reproach from Methodism and a hindrance from the cause of God; while he who votes adversely, votes to perpetuate the estrangements, the rivalries, the waste of men and money, that has characterized the past. It would be folly to suppose that any basis could be prepared that would fully meet the views of every one. The question is not, therefore, Is the present basis perfect? but, Are the objections to it of sufficient weight to lead us to reject it altogether? Let it be clearly understood, the basis now before the Church cannot be accepted or rejected *in part*;—as a whole it stands or falls, and upon its adoption or rejection by the Churches depends the fate of Union. Some will think otherwise. They will say, If the present basis is rejected, another can be formed. Doubtless another *can* be formed, but no one for a moment believes that it *will*.

On Whom Rests the Chief Responsibility?

Although the Basis of Union is to be discussed and voted upon in the various Quarterly Meetings, there can be no doubt that the chief responsibility rests upon the Ministry of the uniting Churches, because upon the attitude they assume, the fate of the Union movement largely depends. There is nothing in the Basis of Union which infringes upon the rights and privileges of the laity, and hence nothing to which they are likely to take strong exception. But as we have heard prominent laymen remark more than once, much will depend on the way in which the subject is brought before the Quarterly Meetings. If the Minister takes a hostile attitude, it will greatly influence the vote. Our official members, as a rule, treat the opinions and wishes of their Ministers with respect, and it

would be an exceptional case in which a Quarterly Meeting would carry a measure to which the members knew the minister was strongly opposed. All this but serves to show how great are the responsibilities of the hour. We are making history. Let it be a history of which we shall not be ashamed in the coming time.

A Parting Word.

I cannot close this paper without a word to those brethren, lay and clerical, in the various Churches, who through evil and good report have stood calmly and unflinchingly by the principles of Union. I do not mean the class who with very unnecessary emphasis declare on every possible occasion that they are Union men, and then proceed to argue vehemently against Union; but I speak to the men who by voice, and vote, and pen, have steadily maintained that the Methodists are—or ought to be—one all over the world. Brethren, yours has been no easy task. Those from whom you had a right to expect support have tried to weaken your hands, and have not been slow to attribute to you sinister motives and selfish aims. Be it so. You can afford to wait. History will do you justice. But should it not,—should your motives fail of just recognition from contemporaries, or even from posterity, you may rely with certainty upon what is far better,—the voice of an approving conscience, and the benediction of Him who said,—

"BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS: FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED THE CHILDREN OF GOD."